Women Get Cooking Hints From Hotel Kitchens; New York Chefs Must Cater to Polyglot Tastes

By Quinn L. Martin

YOUNG HOUSEWIFE, you who are causing broad grins on the face of the husband these days since you donned the little white apron and determined to "do" your own cooking, have you yet learned to make jelly out of rose petals, or a salad dressing from orange blossoms? If not, why?

Have you tried before the head of the house recently a caramel cake "topped" with sauce made of violets, or a sort of pastry shot through with daffodils? No? Then, why?

It is being done, and that is no joke, either. With the ending of the war and the coming of peace and a conscience that will permit of a little expansion, the chefs in the great hotel restaurants of New York City are concocting all sorts of foods no one ever heard of before, and in these spreading white kitchens where food is being turned out at breakneck speed each day wonderful strides in the art of food preparation are being taken.

Everything Is White

Entering the snowy white expanses on the lower floors of such hotels as the Plaza, Waldorf-Astoria, McAlpin, Biltmore, Commodore, Ritz-Carlton, Astor, Pennsylvania, and Vanderbilt, one sees before him an outlay of equipment and appointments, to say nothing of the novel articles that go to make up the dinner these days, that almost stagger one with their numbers. White, white, white, and still more white confronts you, and as you go on and on through the different departments of the kitchens you wonder if there are enough persons in the entire city to ever consume all that is stored away, yet it is only enough to last for one day.

The chef who makes a success of his calling nowadays must be an expert accountant, a genius in higher mathematics, a farmer, a connoisseur, a poultry raiser, a judge of qualities, a master of economics and a teacher besides.

This last requisite is made necessary by the great number of women and young girls throughout New York City and the East who make it their business regularly to inspect the great kitchens in the quest for new ideas in preparing dishes. Domestic science teachers and their classes invade the great white rooms presided over by the white capped cooks, asking questions of every kind imaginable, and the chef either must be prepared to answer intelligently or he is marked as a novice, and nothing more humiliating could happen to the chef of 1920.

A Fine Art

Cooking has become a fine art with them. The chefs are being graduated now from schools for cooking. They are being taught to cook in French, Italian, Spanish, and in every other manner under the sun, because the time has come when the average Frenchman or Italian who comes to these shores must have his favorite dish before he will register at a hotel, and so the hotel managements have installed cooks who prepare food after the fashion of all the nations on the face of the globe.

Perhaps no more experienced or efficient representative of the cooking profession (for it has become a profession now) could be found than Chef Léony Derouet, in charge of the Hotel Commodore kitchen. It was Léony who was chosen to prepare the food for King Albert of Belgium on the recent trip to this country and home again of the royal family. It was his known ability to cook in any style desired, and after the accustomed taste of any nationality in the world, that caused him to be chosen, and evidence that he did his work well lies in the fact that after the King had arrived home a few months ago he bestowed upon Léony Derouet a Belgian decoration, making the Commodore chef a member of the King's household.

Has Calling Days

Léony is known by scores of men and women of the most widely known families in this country and abroad, who go into the kitchens at the Commodore whenever they come to New York, or dine there, to see him.

He has set aside two days each week for showing through his kitchens different school classes and groups of young wives who desire to know more of how he makes battleships out of icing and log cabins of butter. They stand around him, quizzing him about a salad they had with their dinner the night before, and he takes them to one corner of the kitchen and explains in detail just how he conceived the idea and how he carried it out.

Chef Léony has studied cooking in Paris, in Madrid and in South America. He claims the distinction of never having failed to produce a single dish requested by a foreigner stopping at the Commodore.

It is the unwritten law of every large kitchen in the larger hotels in New York City that the cook, or assistant cook, who allows as much as a lead pencil mark to remain on the floor after he sees it is discharged without further notice. Cleanliness is paramount. Cleanliness is the very life of the profession. Cleanliness overshadows speed, even, and when you consider that at the Astor Hotel the following course of a banquet attended by one thousand persons is not placed on the stove until the last two spoonsful or forksful of food of the preceding course is consumed by the diner, you will understand that speed is not entirely an overlooked matter.

White Silk Gloves

But the cleanliness to which these men who glide about on the shining floors of the kitchens adhere is almost unbelievable unless one sees it with his own eyes.

The chef at the Hotel Plaza supplies his men with white silk gloves. Not one cook may touch a frying pan or a skillet or a water boiler or a fork until he has slipped on his gloves. His nails must be polished and manicured daily. To insure against an infringement of this order, the chef goes each day to each cook in his employ and inspects his nails.

I walked into the kitchens of the Plaza the other day just in time to witness this daily inspection. It carried me back to army days, when the commanding officer came each day, instructing every man to turn over his cot and throw out his duds and show whether or not he was keeping himself in good trim.

Like Military Inspection

This Plaza chef scrutinized the finger nails of his men with the care given to a tuned-up prize fighter by his zealous manager. He took their hands and turned them over, and on one occasion he frowned and said to the owner of a set of nails that to the ordinary person would appear splendid enough to belong to any matinee idol, "they aren't shined right. Better clean up a little. And don't let this happen again!"

Throughout the Plaza cooking departments, the rooms of which extend for a long half block in each direction, the walls and ceilings are snowy white. The floors are of plain pine, washed down five times each day until they appear to be wearing away under the soap and cloths. The wood is washed so clean that it throws off the odor of the forest, and at its edges, where the baseboard joins it, hot water is thrown constantly by an automatic spray operated by a man whose work it is to keep the edges of the room steaming throughout the day.

Why is this?

You know as much about it as anybody. The chef in charge will tell you it is simply a matter of precaution. No chances taken, he will say.

After you have placed your rolls in the oven the next time, consider that at the Hotel Biltmore each day one mile of buns, placed side by side, are baked. Enough bread is baked each day to supply the city of Syracuse, and the flour bill there is as great as the combined flour bill of the inhabitants of Elizabeth, N. J. This includes the flour used for pastry, of course.

The Flour Under Guard

A barrel, or a one hundred pound sack, of flour in the bins of the Biltmore kitchens will not even cover the floor with white. These bins are guarded by a tall, energetic young man in flannels who dares any one to come near to the door when it is opened by the cooks coming for more flour for their bread. It isn't that he fears any one will make away with any of the flour. He doesn't want it contaminated even by the presence of passers-by.

One may look into the great bins through the plate glass sides. Likewise, he may pass on down the kitchens to the frosty glassed meat containers, where great rows of fresh duckling, chicken, squab, goose, mutton, veal, beef and pork are arranged, each in a separate partition, ready for the butchers. The hotels employ their own butchers, and these gentlemen hold the distinction of being the masters of their trade. They not only buy the meat on the outside, but they apportion it to the cooks.

The reason you get a thick steak when you order one of that variety is because the butcher is on the job, and not until your order arrives is the steak cut for you. Not in these days do you find cuts of meat awaiting the expected orders. No longer do you find chicken in the oven, only awaiting the call of the waiter, relayed by the cook. You get a chicken or a duck or anything else you order right from the hook in the freezing refrigerators.

The man in charge of the cooking, incidentally, has seen the farm on which the poultry and other meats are produced. He goes regularly to the country estates where the fowl and birds are raised and sees to it that the most sanitary and healthy conditions exist there.

Has Government O. K.

The official stamp of cleanliness and "correctness" has been placed upon the kitchens of one of the largest hotels in the world, the McAlpin. There Chef Louis Paquet, known throughout Europe and the United States as an authority on foods and their preparation, once a professor of economics and an instructor of cooking in Paris, has arranged his cooking facilities so carefully that a government inspector, going into the spreading kitchens of the McAlpin recently, declared:

"This is the most beautiful place of its kind I have ever seen."

When the city government offered a few months ago to distribute white cards of merit to those hotel owners whose kitchens measured up to the "excellent" mark in cleanliness, the McAlpin received its card within two days after the inspector made his investigation. It has been said there were but three or four of these cards issued.

M. Paquet oversees the cooking of more than five thousand separate orders of food each day. This means that he not only knows that those orders have been made and have been filled, but that he actually oversees the preparation of them. He is always to be found in the kitchens, and the reason you may have waited ten minutes longer for your combination salad at the McAlpin recently probably was because M. Paquet came across your order being forwarded to you without the proper pinch of salt in it or the wrong plate beneath it. He is a stickler for details. That is also why you will find the most unique garnishing on your steak when you go for a dinner in the grillroom. If there's a geranium or an American Beauty rose peeping out from beneath your steak, don't be alarmed. The chef has ordered it placed there. He believes that if greens may be used for garnishing a dish, so may the full blossoms. He also prepares jellies and pastry made of rose petals and orange blossoms.

"I believe the day will come," he said recently, "when we will find all our meats garnished with roses and pinks and violets. Some will have theirs done with orchids. Although that day will be after the war costs have passed, I think. I believe one's food is half in the appearance. I believe one would just as soon have good looking food as good tasting food. At any rate, if it doesn't look good it doesn't taste good.

Flowers Better Than Music

"Personally, I should much prefer to have a well prepared and served steak with a Killarney rose protruding from one side of the plate than to have that same steak with music, if I had my choice. I think there are a lot of persons just like me in this regard. I try to serve to the people what I think myself is nicest."

It has been said of M. Paquet that he often goes into the main dining room of the McAlpin alone, sits down at a table where he may hear the conversation of those about him and finds out for himself just how his efforts are "taking." On one or two occasions he has gone back to the kitchens wrathful to the extent of discharging a cook who has allowed food to be sent to the dining room improperly prepared. This is his secret for finding out what the public wants.

"It is just like the theatrical producer," he says. "He scouts about and finds out what the people want in the way of entertainment. I find out what they want most to eat.

"The American traveler is noted for his desire for an entire change in food, amusement and environment, in everything, when away from home. Yet if he were really given a decided change in his food he would not be satisfied and after but one or two meals he would begin to prepare for his return home. He can and does get the change he looks for, but when his appetite returns to normal, which it invariably does and very quickly, he finds the reliable old staples always present on the most fashionable establishments' menus, and they are prepared in much the same fashion from one end of the world to the other. The foreign visitor, and especially the one from Latin countries, demands and expects his viands exactly as at home. This has brought about a study of Spanish food preparation and the employment of Spanish cooks, which sees its best development at the Waldorf-Astoria or the McAlpin, which have very numerous guests from Central and South America and European countries at this time.

Weather and Menus

"The weather reports are a big factor in food buying and preparation, for the chef of a big establishment knows that a rainy or a muggy or a torrid day plays havoc with an otherwise happy appetite, and, of course, if his patronage to any great extent comes from outside the hotel there will be fewer luncheon and dinner parties.

"The advent of prohibition has brought about quite a change in the kitchen, and although many a thoughtful housewife has laid away a store of wine or brandy for her holiday cooking, this cannot always last, and other ingredients must be found to give the desired tang to the mince pie or fruit cake. Cider will be found a very good substitute in cases where brandy or wine is required. It is a fact that even before liquor was voted out the majority of luncheons, banquets and suppers served during the last year and a half were entirely minus alcoholic stimulants of any sort whatever, and that whereas at the time of the opening of the McAlpin, seven years ago, quite 90 per cent of business men ordered a cocktail before luncheon or dinner, a year ago this had dropped to less than 10 per cent. And although we have been without even the much talked of 2.75 per cent beer since the first application of the war-time prohibition period, the crowds in the dining rooms at dinner or the after-theatre and supper dance throngs in the grillroom have not diminished a whit in size or enthusiasm."

The matter of speed in serving food is worked out to a remarkable degree in the kitchens of the Hotel Astor. One feature there is meritorious enough, in the minds of those who know the details of the business, to make those kitchens well worth the time to inspect of any man or woman, no matter how busy he or she may be.

The grand ballroom is on the main floor, just one floor above the kitchens. Large banquets are held in the grand ballroom. One entire side of the ballroom may be thrown open, when the occasion demands it, for the waiters to rush through in bringing out the food. It is said that no other hotel in America, and therefore in the world, manages its banquet service in such rapid-fire fashion.

Elevators for Food

It is accomplished through the installation of a system of "elevators" which run between the stoves below and the banquet hall level. These elevators work in much the same manner as the escalator on which you have ridden at the Pennsylvania Station, excepting that, instead of steps, there are long, wide shelves attached, upon which the plates of hot food are pushed directly from the top of the ranges below. The plates ascend on the elevator, no hand touching them; are raked off the elevator shelves into the trays of the waiters when they reach the banquet hall floor, and are carried out, piping hot, to the tables. In this way no person touches even a cup or a bowl containing drink or soup, and instead of picking up the plates from the stoves to place them on the elevators, they are shoved into their place by a long paddle.

The Hotel Ritz-Carlton, just as it sparkles in its lobbies, tearoom and foyers, sparkles in the great kitchens below, where the food is prepared that has earned for that hotel the reputation that places it in the front ranks as a Mecca for good things to eat.

White uniforms, including white shoes, neckties, hose and waistcoats, are the order there, and there is an inspection daily to determine whether or not any one within its walls, including the assistant cooks and the men who prepare the vegetables for the cook, has violated the regulation.

A Beautiful Kitchen

Perhaps no more beautiful kitchen exists in New York City than that of the Hotel Vanderbilt, where the Della Robbia room and the great white dining room on the main floor almost nightly are the scenes of gay parties of the city's most aristocratic families. Walton H. Marshall, manager of the hotel, is the originator of the scheme of getting at the bottom of things in so far as his food supply is concerned, and he sees to it himself or has one of his most trusted employees, visit the farms and the factories and the packing houses where he buys the foods that are served, to see whether they are precisely what he has specified.

In order that he might show the patrons of the Vanderbilt how their food is prepared in the kitchens, he recently established a small separate kitchen on the grillroom floor, placing there a stock of meats and fish, so that diners who so desired might go and select their favorite entrée and see it taken from its glass case, placed on the iron and cooked.

Here, too, the men doing the cooking are required to work in white silk gloves. A large number of the cooks at the Vanderbilt are French, although there are many Americans there, too. A cook is retained for the Latin-American patronage and one for the European sojourners as well.

And then there is the huge kitchen of the Pennsylvania, where enough food is prepared in one day to supply many small cities throughout the United States. Row upon row of glistening china and shelf over shelf of fine silver attract the eye as one wanders through the maze of cooking utensils and equipment in these kitchens. Silence is the catchword here, and the cement floors and the modern ventilating systems of this superb hotel makes the kitchens a restful, sightseeing spot rather than a great workshop where thousands of meals are cooked and made ready for the different dining rooms and banquet halls each afternoon and night.

A Mecca for Cooks

Learning of the lengths to which the builders of this hotel had gone to supply to the men doing the cooking every possible facility for proper care of the food, classes in cooking from girls' schools and high schools through the East go there almost each week to see it. It is said the Pennsylvania kitchens could be duplicated in any home, of course, on a scale correspondingly small, and the same efficiency be obtained. The kitchen is patterned to give the utmost aid in the work of arranging and preparing food and in bringing speed and accuracy and a lack of confusion to the highest point.

The Waldorf-Astoria kitchens, where in the many years of that hotel's existence the most expensive dinners have been prepared that have been recorded in the annals of the hotel industry, probably has been visited by more persons than any other. Each night sees several parties, in evening dress, walking through the kitchens. There the widely heralded Waldorf salad originated, the Waldorf pudding, the Waldorf lobster, the Waldorf pastry. Stepping into the sweet scented pastry department of these kitchens any day you will find deep drawers filled with warm macaroons, out of which you will be invited to take one that has just left the oven. And it will be well worth the taking. Chef Rene Anjard says he has cured many a bad cold, cases of indigestion and whatnot by taking the afflicted one downstairs and opening up the little drawers holding the sweet cakes that haven't yet become cold.

There is a lesson in economics, in cleanliness, in efficiency and in beauty inside the walls of these kitchens in the world's greatest hotels that is being learned more and more as the servant problem and the high cost of living make themselves felt. Go and see for yourself.

AT THE upper left is Chef Louis Seres, of the Biltmore. The table shown is in the cold meats department of the Biltmore kitchens

CHEF LOUIS PAQUET, of the McAlpin, dressing a flower salad

CHEF LEONY DEROUET, of the Commodore, showing a domestic science class through his kitchens

CHEF RENE ANJARD, of the Hotel Waldorf-Astoria